

Break The Surface, Take The Wheel by ohwonders

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Summary: "Is this what we are now?" she asks. "Being scared of our own shadows, looking for weapons when a light flickers, blinking and seeing that place, just for a second. Pretending none of it's happening so our families don't realise. Wondering if our little brothers are doing the same." What might have happened if Jonathan had followed Nancy at the end of the hospital scene in 1x08.

Break The Surface, Take The Wheel

If you recognise it, it's not mine.

He can still feel tears on his face, damp and slightly stiff with salt. They make him feel cleaner than anything else has so far, like something in him got cracked open and flushed out, all the blood and dirt and gunk from the last week washed away with the dull ache and sharp relief of seeing his little brother in a hospital bed, asleep and alive.

Will's awake now, blocked from his view by the other kids. They're all talking over one another, drowning out his mom's warnings with jumbled phrases that mean nothing to him but make Will laugh so it's got to be good.

He glances behind him when he hears a scuffed footstep- his heart is already racing, and he wonders if this battle-ready state is this what he'll be like for the rest of his life- and sees Nancy turning away and walking down the corridor. She turns left instead of back towards the waiting room, and he only hesitates for a moment, long enough to meet his mom's eyes and give her a nod, before following.

He catches up with her in the empty stairwell. She startles when he puts a hand on her shoulder, a jolt running through her entire body and into his hand, a shared reminder that he's not the only one.

"Hey," he says when she turns to face him, eyes wide, face taut. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't," she says, slightly distant. "I was already..." She shakes her head. "It's fine."

"Are you okay?" he asks.

Nancy hesitates, and then laughs, a broken sound that echoes hollowly around them and god, he hates how it sends shivers up his spine. "I guess," she says.

"Yeah," he says. "Me too." He can feel her looking up at him, and he shifts his gaze to the blank white wall. A part of his mind wonders if that crack has always been there.

"I was thinking about Barb," Nancy says softly. "And how she never even knew what was going on. She was just... gone."

Gone, gone, gone, Eleven's voice whispers in the back of his mind, water splashing around her. Another kid that didn't make it back.

"She might have figured it out," Nancy continues. "She's- she was smart, you know? She'd have understood all this stuff about- about the Upside-Down and everything. I still don't get it. We're just fleas on a tightrope to- to whatever's out there. Just fleas." She bites her lip and folds her arms across her chest and looks down at the ground, small movements that catch his eye and tug at his heart.

He doesn't know what to say, so he picks at the bandage wrapped around his hand- not the same one she'd put on him, they'd both had them taken off and cleaned and rewrapped, not too many questions asked, stranger things were going on in the hospital tonight- and thinks about the scar they were probably going to share. Thinks about how it's probably the first injury she's had that's going to leave a mark.

"I know how to set a bear trap," he says eventually. "I didn't know that before. I didn't think I'd ever need to."

"I know how to load a gun."

"How to plan a funeral."

"How to build a sensory deprivation tank."

"How to reassemble fairy lights."

They laugh at that one, albeit quietly, voices cracking off the white walls. "This is crazy," Jonathan says heavily, and sits down on the stairs like the words cost him something.

"It is," Nancy agrees, and sits beside him. They're silent for a few minutes, both of them breathing softly and resisting the urge to

glance behind them. "How's your brother?" Nancy asks after a couple of minutes.

"He's okay. Keeps coughing. The air in that place really messed up his lungs." Another silence. "How's yours?"

"He's... I don't know. Covered in bruises. Mom was trying to get a look at them and he wouldn't let her. Apparently Eleven threw him into a wall before she-" She trails off, and Jonathan realises that neither of them are really sure of what happened in the school. Hopper turned up at the house and said *what the hell happened here* to Nancy and then saw Steve and said *why is he here* like he couldn't believe that another kid had been dragged into this, and then finally spotted Jonathan hunched in the corner trying not to breathe too hard- the monster cracked a rib or three, apparently- and said *your brother's safe, kid, come along to the hospital all of you*, so they did. And when they got there Will had been asleep with their mom in there with him, and he'd barely noticed Nancy's little brother at the time, too preoccupied by a deep, aching need to see Will right that instant, but Mike had been leaning against the window, his breath misting up the night until Nancy put an arm round his shoulders and led him back to a seat, and Eleven was nowhere, and when he saw the look in his mom's eyes he knew.

A door slams somewhere in the hospital and they both jump, Nancy's hand reaching for a gun that isn't there and their fingers tangling together as Jonathan flinches towards her. It lasts a second, two, five, before Nancy tightens her grip on his hand. "Is this what we are now?" she asks.

"What do you mean?" His voice comes out as a whisper. He can feel her pulse under his fingertips, like the drumbeat of a song he doesn't know yet.

"This. Being scared of our own shadows. Looking for weapons when a light flickers. Blinking and seeing that place, just for a second. Pretending none of it's happening so our families don't realise. Wondering if our little brothers are doing the same." She inhales, the sound wet with tears. "This, holding hands on the back stairs because nobody else is going to understand and nobody else should have to, Jonathan, nobody else should have know what it's like in there, not

your mom or Will, not Hopper or Eleven or-

"Or you," Jonathan says, cutting her off. "You shouldn't have to know either, Nancy." Her name tastes of salt in his mouth, and he can't tell who's shaking more when she falls against his chest and his head drops to her shoulder and they sit there and hold each other in the stairwell like there's nothing else they can do.

Jonathan thinks about telling her then. *What are we, then?* he could say. *Tell me, please tell me.*

Nancy's tears are hot against his neck and his are damp on her hair. "I'm sorry," she's whispering. "I'm sorry, Jon."

"What are you sorry for?" he whispers back, although he already knows.

"I- I like you," she admits. "But I- Steve-"

The name makes his chest ache, although that might be the cracked ribs. "Steve," he agrees.

"I like you," she says again. "And- and I like Steve, and I don't know-"

"Hey," he says, pulling away so he can see her face. "It's okay." *I like you too, Nancy Wheeler*, part of him wants to say. *I've liked you ever since I first saw you standing in the hallway at school talking like you were telling one story and living another, since long before you even knew my name.* "I have my brother back," he says instead, tongue clumsy in his mouth, words slow in his head. "And you helped, and I can't- I'll never be able to thank you enough for that."

"Jon-"

"And you have Steve," he says. His hands fall away from hers, lie open on his palm, one smudged with grime, the other clean and bandaged. He closes the bandaged one, and thinks of the crack his fist made when it hit Steve's face, the squelching thump of the bat in Steve's hand when it hit the monster and knocked it away from him. "Anyone who runs back into a monster attack to help can't be all that bad," he says, keeping his voice steady. "But don't do anything you don't want to. Life's too short to let love hurt you. My mom could tell

you that, a hundred times over."

Nancy goes quiet, and for a moment he thinks she might be crying again, but then she laughs.

"What is it?" he asks.

"Nothing. Just... I don't know what's crazier." She pauses and a smile touches her face, a real one. "The fact that I'm worrying about- about boys after everything that's just happened, alternate worlds and superpowered kids and everything, or the fact that Steve Byers is giving me love advice."

"The second one," he says immediately. "Definitely."

Nancy laughs again, and stands up. "I guess I'd better go," she says. "Mom'll want to take Mike back, get home."

"Fair enough," Jonathan says, and follows her up the stairs. They pause at Will's room- it's quiet now. Will's asleep again, but when Jonathan pushes open the door his mom looks up and smiles.

"Karen was just looking for you," she says softly. "She says you can stay with them tonight. I think Jim told them what you did to the house."

It takes Jonathan a second to realise that Jim is Hopper, the same amount of time it takes Nancy to murmur, "I'm so sorry, Mrs Byers."

"Call me Joyce," his mom says. "And don't be sorry. We can fix it, can't we, Jonathan?"

"Yeah," he says a second too late, delayed by thoughts of hospital bills and missed opportunities. "We can fix it all." Scorch marks and bear traps and holes in the walls and ceilings are nothing compared to the lacuna Will would have left otherwise.

"Thank you," his mom says, and then she hugs Nancy tightly and pulls him in as well, kisses him on the cheek because she can't reach the top of his head anymore. "Goodnight, kids," she says.

"Night, mom. Night, Will," he says, leaning over the bed and dropping

a clumsy kiss on his brother's forehead. Even asleep he looks exhausted, pale with deep lines in his forehead.

The ride home is eerily silent; Mrs Wheeler says, "I'm so glad you're both safe," to her kids as they pull out of the parking lot, and Mike just sighs heavily from where he's slumped against the shotgun window. He's asleep by the time they get back, a hollow look on his child's face; Jonathan carries him inside and up to his room even though it makes his ribs ache. He's slightly taller than Will, but thinner too, his body beginning to shed the last scraps of baby fat. He twists in his sleep, still fully clothed as Jonathan drapes the blankets over him and hears him mumble, "El- El- *Eleven*-" before he can pull the door not-quite-shut behind him.

"Jon," Nancy's voice says behind him before he can head back down the corridor to the guest room Mrs Wheeler had made up for him. "Uh. Do you- can you sleep here?"

He can see the look on her face, the mixed messages of the girl with a heart tearing in two and the girl who doesn't want to be alone, and her eyes alone would make a photo to break his heart, but he says "okay."

He jerks bolt upright in the night, gasping for breath and grabbing for weapons that aren't there; she wakes up sobbing five minutes later, and they're both awake, hunched on her bed like shadowy nightmares, to hear Mike murmuring Eleven's name in his sleep down the hall until he too jolts awake and they hear the muffled sounds of a small boy trying to do his crying as quietly as he can.